

Kemp, G. (2020) Review of Art and Form: From Roger Fry to Global Modernism., by Sam Rose. *Burlington Magazine*, 162(1403), pp. 164-165. [Book Review].

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/221676/>

Deposited on: 04 August 2020

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

Art and Form: From Roger Fry to Global Modernism

By Sam Rose. 201 pp. + 27 b. & w. ill. (Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, PA, 2019), \$89.95. ISBN 978-0-271-08238-7.

By Gary Kemp

In the 1910s, thanks primarily to Roger Fry and Clive Bell, there appeared front and centre the idea that what we genuinely respond to in art, what moves us most deeply, reliably and unchangeably, is ‘significant form’. The idea became explicit and urgent at any rate amongst those for whom self-consciousness about such things is vital—those in philosophical aesthetics, the history of art, and the burgeoning field of art criticism. Of course the idea was not exactly new. Immanuel Kant might well be credited with having worked out the idea in its many dimensions in his *Critique of Judgement*, and no doubt scholars will be quick to identify earlier precursors. And the idea was perhaps present if inchoate in the less academic and more culturally aware writing on art in the latter half of the nineteenth century of the so-called ‘aestheticists’ such as Walter Pater—the writer of the memorable line ‘All arts constantly aspire to the condition of music’. But what made the idea especially timely were the extraordinary changes seen in art itself, lately due to such figures as Manet, Degas, Cezanne, Matisse, and Picasso. Many were convinced that art was stripping away the adventitious accretions of ‘representation’ and ‘narration’, laying bare the Essence of Art, which was Form; it alone could convey the deepest aspects of artistic vision.

In this important book, Sam Rose picks this story apart—both conceptually (Fry himself, as well as many other writers, were more interested in *expression* than they were in defending the idea that it all goes back to an ascetic notion of form), and ideologically and politically (the idea that there is a unique essence to art—which just so happens to have its finest manifestations in works of early twentieth white Europeans—was insupportable). Yet

the idea of formalism can be seen as suitably flexible, as relative to the different contexts of art-making practices, therefore capable of moving with the times and between places and cultures, leaving us ‘with the mixture of variety and unity by which we find ourselves living through our own attachments and forms of likeness, and bound together by the planetary-scale concerns that are modernity’s irradicable legacy’, in Rose’s closing words. The book is a defence of formalism, so long as the idea is properly understood.

He gets there via a rich and sometimes dense fabric of argument, explanation and narrative, replete with favourite and familiar names. The book could have been twice the length, as one often wants more detail, and one also would like more examples (with 158 medium sized pages of text in smallish font there are twenty-seven figures and no plates). The first chapter does the service of disassociating Fry’s views from the more austere and more simplistic formalism often attributed to Bell, the view that representation is irrelevant to artistic value. Fry was very much a ‘hands-on’ historian and connoisseur as well as an artist; these count for more than the sum of the parts, for ‘[w]hat connoisseurship helps add ... is an explanation of how it is that form and intention can work hand in hand’ (26). Works of art do not merely display formal properties but are *formed*—made, shaped—intentionally by human hands, and in this lies the avenue from the artist’s mind to the spectator’s: in apprehending the form of a work one can come to know the responsible intention, and therefore the artist’s mind. But the mind known needn’t be the historical artist’s: ‘The artistic personality was to be *hypothetically* reconstructed primarily through attention to the works alone’(31; emphasis added). The always-there threat of subjectivism is to be overcome by the experience of the work’s being ‘correlated with the experiences of other investigators’ (57).

The founding of the Courtauld Institute, the ways in which the purpose and nature of art were contested by Marxists, Socialists and Freudians, the assimilation of formalist ideas by artists of Africa and India, indeed the early history of this magazine, all of this might seem

rather a lot for such a book to delve into but Rose's purpose is always clear, to examine the ways in which Fry's idea of form can be seen as common currency. The chapter on Design Theory discusses a contradiction that was keenly felt, and which was very much urgent for Fry, between 'mass democratic culture'—especially machine-generated artefacts—and 'high-art oriented formalism'(101); Fry was 'unable to give up on the idea of the "nervous tremor"' (103) of the flesh-and-blood artist's hand. The Arts and Crafts impulse was psychologically difficult to maintain in the 1930s with the advent of mass consumerism, and formalism had the insistent charge of elitism to confront (film and photography make a brief showing here but I wish Rose had also discussed architecture, fashion and the automobile in this connection). The tension represents not just the standard high/low distinction but a tension within formalism itself: if form is the thing, and is to be understood as expressiveness and communication, then why isn't 'the popular', the 'crudities and vulgarities of the masses' (a slightly tongue-in-cheek quotation from Herbert Read, 126), the natural goal?

It is unclear that Rose really presents a satisfactory answer. But the last chapter 'Modernism and Form in Africa, Britain, and South Asia' sketches a conception that promises to be suitably adaptable. After case studies involving Indian and Nigerian artists—which rightly understood, show the sophisticated self-consciousness of their absorption of western modernism—Rose sketches a recursive historical model of unfolding practices that make it possible to '*not just to rely on the [artists] own intuition*' (158, author emphasis) but which nevertheless allows formal innovation. It is not new to say that to understand a work one must know its location in the history of art, but what is I take it new is to understand it as a remark about formalism itself, giving the lie to the Platonist, timeless and context-independent conception of form. Such 'anti-essentialist modernism' perhaps comes as close as any ism to a general characterisation of art as actually practiced.

In a work which mentions Richard Wollheim repeatedly, it is puzzling that Wollheim's apparent demonstration of the incoherence of form-sans-representational-properties is absent (all the more so as the key piece 'On Formalism and Pictorial Organization', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59/2:127-137, is listed in the bibliography; also Rose apparently touches on without acknowledging Wollheim's enormously influential idea of 'Two-Foldedness'; 87). For his part Rose stresses that form should be understood as what results from 'intention in action' (147), and in the penultimate section of the book that it tends more to the conceptual-imagistic, primordial or inner representational than to the naturalistic depiction of outer appearances, more gestural than optical; and that although it must be understood as relative to history and culture, the formal, so understood, is what matters most urgently for expression.